MERRY

A Horror Novel

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ABSTRACT

Merry is a rural horror novel set in contemporary Saskatchewan. The fictional town of Merry, set about forty miles south-southwest of Saskatoon, is slowly being occupied by a satanic-like cult which is trying to gain power over a magic rock called the Shebbea, buried underneath Merry's church. The novel opens with the arrival of Lou, the leader of the cult and satanic figure arriving at the gas station of Richard Walsh and his son Chad, located on the edges of Merry. Lou hands Chad a box of matches, convinced Chad will figure out what to do with them.

Over time, the lines between those in the know about Lou's undertaking and those unaware become more and more clear. Among others, Lou gains influence over Stan, a somewhat developmentally disabled man who lives with his mother. Other followers arrive and gather at Merry's hotel. Eventually, Chad finds out about what is happening but as he returns home, his father grounds him and takes away his phone, disregarding Chad's story. Chad has to find a way to escape the gas station and let people know what is happening.

The novel is an allegory on the modern trend of political division and the struggle for "truth" in the post-truth era. It cuts through the simplistic dichotomy of good and evil by establishing a web of relationships between the two opposing sides. The setting of a small, dying rural community provides the perfect backdrop for the clash of these contrastive, macrocosmic forces while maintaining the image of a close-knit, interconnected community.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Horror is much more than monsters, gore and violence. It is "both an everyday occurrence […] and a way of dramatizing our hidden fears and desires through fantasy that takes the everyday that few steps further" (Wisker 1). Therefore, horror is about allegory; the best horror stories serve as critiques of society by pushing what Stephen King in *Danse Macabre* calls its "phobic pressure points" (4). My thesis *Merry: A Horror Novel* follows this idea by translating current Western political developments into the microcosm of a fictional town in rural Saskatchewan, thus trying to project the next pressure point of horror fiction.

Merry is a stranger-comes-to-town horror novel in which the satanic antagonist Lou arrives in town and assembles his followers from inside and outside the town. Lou's goal is to isolate Merry in order to gain possession of the Shebbea, a large rock from which everything in the universe originates and which is located underneath the town's church. In a last-ditch effort, a small group of resistance is formed in an attempt to defend the church and fend Lou's troops off. Aside from the overarching plot, an emphasis is placed on the communal and personal relationships between the inhabitants of Merry and their motivation for or against joining Lou's cult.

I refer to *Merry* as a horror novel rather than a Gothic novel which opens up the question what distinguishes horror from Gothic. Clive Bloom rightly points out that "the answer is as complex and problematic theoretically as it seems simple and uncomplicated practically" (155) and he contends that horror and Gothic are often interchangeable terms (155), but this statement is problematic since it would suggest that Ann Radcliffe and Stephen King were writing in the same genre. A handier approach is to view horror as a subgenre of the Gothic, as David Punter and Glennis Byron suggest (Punter/Byron xiii) which also supports Anne Radcliffe's classic distinction between terror and horror (Davison 30): "terror activates the mind and the imagination, allowing it to overcome, transcend even, its fears and doubts, enabling the subject

to move from a state of passivity to activity" while horror "freezes human faculties, rendering the mind passive and immobilising the body" (Botting 68f).

One classic trait of horror is the prevalence of the supernatural, more specifically the monster. The monster functions "as the displaced embodiment of tendencies that are repressed or, in Julia Kristeva's sense of the term, 'abjected' within a specific culture" (Punter/Byron 264). They represent the return of the repressed, "the unfolding and fulfillment of terrible destinies incipient in the […] past" (Savoy 174). The character of Lou takes this concept to a different level: not only is he continually returning every forty-two years, but the novel's end also hints at his immortality, which means he will eventually return again.

Monsters as personified 'return of the repressed' address contemporary issues: "the Gothic has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history" (Bruhm 260). Stephen King refers to these anxieties as "phobic pressure points" (4) which horror is trying to push. These pressure points obviously change over time: from captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* as one of the earliest examples, to the "red scare" of Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* in 1955 and the 21st century trend towards zombies, which have been attributed to everything from post-9/11 terrorism (King xx) to increasing deindividuation of the Self (Punter/Byron 265).

Merry addresses the current political and cultural division in North America and Europe. This is not a new issue. Contemporary developments mirror the cultural wars of the 1960s to some extent: "For the Left the 1960s was a period of transformative activism. […] From the Conservative perspective […] American values were threatened during the 1960s" (Sidorsky 240). This threat was expressed through an "increasing prominence of Satanic themes in popular culture more generally during that period" (Murphy/Reyes 143), but especially in horror: Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* and William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* are prominent examples. In line with this tradition, the Satanic theme was a natural choice for *Merry*.

The horror genre also has a tendency to take the conservative side. King says in *Danse Macabre* that "it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us" (King 41). In the light of the cultural wars of the 1960s and the advent of youth culture, it is then no surprise that horror often featured the theme of "the evil, possessed, mutated or 'alien' child" (Murphy/Reyes 144). *The Exorcist* serves as an example for this. On the other hand, in *Rosemary's Baby*, these roles are somewhat reversed, with the young mother and the elderly satanic congregation. *Merry* combines both stances and blurs the lines even further, making the allegiance of every character dependent on their individual circumstances.

This approach is more in line with the postcolonial Canadian Gothic/horror tradition:

> In Canadian literature, the postcolonial Gothic has been put to multiple uses, above all to convey experiences of ambivalence and/or split subjectivity resulting from the inherent incommensurability of conflicted subject positions that have emerged from a colonial context and persisted into the present. (Sugars/Turcotte xi)

This is especially true with regards to identity. Much like in the classic *bildungsroman*, protagonists in Canadian horror often set forth on a journey to find their own identity and calling in life, for example David in Andrew Pypers' *Demonologist* and *The Killing Circle*.

The struggle for identity leads to a "blurring of the distinction between colonial settler and colonial administrator" (Rudd 4), in a country which is equally hostile (or "unhomely"/uncanny) and "homely" to everybody in it. This "settler-invader postcolonial context (Sugars/Turcotte viii) is also prevalent in my novel: some of the invading forces are townspeople and some are from out-of-town, therefore blurring the lines of outsiders and locals, invader and settler.

In a Canadian context, the landscape itself is often seen as hostile and inhospitable, "often dead and unanswering or actively hostile to man" (Atwood 49). This creates a "terror in the face of the unknown wilderness (Sugars/Turcotte ix). This wilderness takes different shapes in

the Canadian tradition, from the forests of Northern Ontario in Michael Rowe's *Enter, Night* to the prairies in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and Jacqueline Baker's *The Horseman's Graves*.

One reason for setting the novel in a fictional, rural community was that the rural setting in itself is traditionally connected to 'Stranger comes to town' stories. According to Bernice Murphy, there are two kinds of Rural Gothic narrative: "The first I that in which those who reside in settled, apparently secure, communities are menaced by outsiders characterised by their freedom of movement and dangerous unpredictability […]. The second kind of 'Rural Gothic' narrative is essentially the reversal of the first type" (Murphy 10f). Examples of these kinds of narratives that have also influenced *Merry* include the aforementioned *The Body Snatcher* and *The Exorcist*, but also Stephen King's *Needful Things*, Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and Robert Bloch's *Psycho*. A Canadian example is the aforementioned Michael Rowe's *Enter, Night*.

More importantly, my story required a wide cast of characters which would ideally be widely interconnected and familiar with each other. This goes back to my idea of suspending the good/evil dichotomy by blurring the lines of invader and settler. Works that served as examples are Stephen King's *The Stand* and *It*, as well as George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* and *A Clash of Kings*. All four books follow multiple characters and interweave their individual journeys. One striking characteristic of these books, which would prove problematic for my own project, is their length. Within the limits of the MFA program, I knew I had to compress my novel. Instead of dedicating an entire chapter to a character, I decided to split up the chapters to increase the pace of the story.

Merry combines classical rural horror and Canadian Gothic themes. At the same time, it aims to be ahead of the curve and project the next central 'pressure point' in horror fiction. It does so by taking themes from the past and applying them with reference to current societal phobic pressure points: the increasing political and cultural divisions within Western/North American society, the struggle for "truth" and its impact on individuals' social environment. Its

power struggles are presented in a way that transcends the lines of good and evil and, in a more Canadian sense, colonizer and colonized.

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